

HERMON OULD
MEMORIAL LECTURE

I

CHARLES MORGAN
Dialogue in Novels & Plays

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*Dialogue in
Novels & Plays*

BY

CHARLES MORGAN

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THE HERMON OULD MEMORIAL LECTURES

The lectures published and to be published in this series are given under the auspices of the English Centre of the P.E.N. and carry the name of Hermon Ould. Hermon Ould was for a long generation the international secretary of the P.E.N. His energy and the tolerant and understanding spirit which he brought to the work were largely responsible for the development of the P.E.N. from its first beginnings as a small group of like-minded authors into a world-wide organisation which to-day links writers throughout the world.

Hermon Ould's own achievements as playwright and poet were submerged in his life-work for the P.E.N. He lacked the leisure to develop his own talent for writing because he devoted himself with such untiring energy to the welfare of writers in general. He made the sacrifice without complaint and diverted the creative power which might have been used to bring him personal reputation and recognition to the service of other writers and of the world-wide ideal of freedom and understanding. He had at least the consolation of knowing that the P.E.N., founded during that brief time of illusory hope which succeeded the first world war, had survived the strain and tragedy of the thirties, the second world war and the disruptive political tensions of the post-war years. It survived and maintained its international structure and its ideals. This was his work.

When he died in 1951 the English Centre of the P.E.N. felt that he could best be commemorated by the foundation of an annual lecture to be given by a writer and thinker of international stature. In this way the name of Hermon Ould will be permanently associated with the work of the living P.E.N. Club and with the living thought of our time.

C. V. WEDGWOOD
President
P.E.N. ENGLISH CENTRE

INTRODUCTION

Many senior members of P.E.N. are better qualified than I am to speak of Hermon Ould's services as its secretary. For my part, I find it pleasant to recall that he was not only an organizer but an originating artist with a special interest in the theatre. In my early days he was highly thought of as an experimentalist, a good deal influenced, and I think handicapped, by the German Expressionist techniques. He had not what may perhaps be called "the gift of large audiences"—a phrase which I use neither in praise nor in blame; but the absence of that gift is discouraging, and it is a mark of Hermon Ould's quality that he never allowed it either to embitter him or to dull his interest in the theatre itself. Last time we met—when we ought to have been earnestly discussing the affairs of some Committee—what the Committee was about I have forgotten, but it was certainly a tedious and frustrate Committee, for all committees are except those over which Miss Wedgwood graciously presides—Hermon Ould and I, before the Minutes had been read and after the Committee had dutifully decided to decide nothing at all, took to the theatre as ducks to water. We began with Strindberg and went on to a discussion of dialogue in general, and I remember how his face lighted up and with how much knowledge and eagerness he talked. It was a subject near to his private, as distinct from his secretarial, heart. That is why I have chosen it. What I have to say, in this memorial lecture, is in a sense a development of my conversation with him.

DIALOGUE IN NOVELS & PLAYS

AS soon as I had chosen this subject, I began to see how fortunate and how rash I had been: fortunate because it interested me more and more and led me on farther and farther into the theory of novels and plays; and rash because a subject so far-reaching and so exploratory is not easy to discuss without either too much complexity or too much simplification. Indeed I feel a little as Lady Bracknell might have done, in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, if she had been required to lecture to Miss Cecily Cardew on the facts of life. Dialogue is an analogous subject. It has a deceptive appearance of superficiality. Anyone can chatter, just as anyone can flirt. But the moment one begins to distinguish between good chatter and bad chatter or between virtuous and unvirtuous flirtation, one is plunged into a study of convention, of morals, of contemporary manners, above all of style. But on the whole I am glad that, of the two subjects, mine is dialogue. In flirtation, style is of outrageous importance, and nothing could be more difficult to illustrate on a lecture-platform.

We are all aware that three of the principal uses of dialogue are the advancement of narrative, the demonstration of character and the creation of atmosphere or mood. Any one of these subjects would provide material for a library of criticism but they are too wide and large to fit conveniently into a

single lecture. We may however observe this—and it is an important distinction to make—that whereas a novelist is free to eliminate dialogue altogether or, if he pleases, to use it only now and then to “point” his story-telling, a dramatist is completely reliant upon it. A novel moreover is five or six times the length of a play and may be much longer. It follows that one of the highest merits of dramatic dialogue, particularly when there is a complex story to tell, is its power to pull several strings at the same time—the strings of narrative, of character, of mood. It must also pull the strings of the past and of the present *at the same time*. A novelist may legitimately suspend his present action and indulge in retrospect, but a dramatist, once launched, cannot do this because he has no means of suspending his present action or at anyrate his audience’s demand for it. If, then, retrospect is necessary to him, he has to use methods of extreme delicacy and guile—methods, if I may say so, much more delicate and adroit than those used by Pinero in the first act of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* where retrospect creaks. He must so design his dialogue that each line, while advancing the present action, little by little and almost imperceptibly admits us to knowledge of the past. The classic example is Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm*.

The task is of extreme difficulty and is made almost impossible if the theatre is large and the audience—I will not say stupid and lazy, but disinclined to intellectual effort. Ibsen gives all the right hints—but they are *hints*; if we are handing round tea-trays we are lost. The retrospective knowledge he offers us is *offered*, not—in the brutal language of the

theatre—"planted" again and again. In brief, great dialogue assumes a certain responsive intelligence in its audience. For example, if our heroine, while arranging flowers, happens to say casually that she dislikes the smell of lilies because they remind her of Aunt Matilda's funeral, that should be enough; it ought not to be necessary to tell the tea-trays again and again that Aunt Matilda is dead. And yet, in a sense, it is necessary if Aunt Matilda's death is of great importance. A dramatist, unless he is an incompetent amateur, will always conform to the conditions of the theatre. If either in retrospect or present action he has something to say that is unusual or peculiarly subtle he will take care to say it, in different forms, more than once, for even the most intelligent playgoer may miss a point now and then. And in the theatre we cannot turn back, as we turn back the pages of a book.

For corresponding reasons, a wise novelist will often avoid the use of dialogue on occasions where a dramatist has to use it because he has no alternative. Here I venture to give an example from my own experience. In a play of mine, *The Flashing Stream*, a naval officer had to explain to a girl the idea of an invention—an aerial homing torpedo dirigible by wireless and by sound vibration. This idea is now familiar to you all, for my prophecy has been unfortunately fulfilled; but in 1938 it was completely unfamiliar both to the girl on the stage and to the whole audience. I had somehow "to get it across". In a novel, the nature of the invention could have been made clear by the narrative method, dialogue being used, if at all, only for lightening or pointing

the explanation. On the stage, the only available means was dialogue, and the difficulties of brevity, lightness and lucidity were extreme. I speak of it only to make this point: there are many scenes where people are talking together, in which the novelist's freedom to get away from direct speech is a god-send to him. He can either slide gracefully away into indirect speech which gives him a chance to compress and summarize; or he can, at will, suspend the dialogue and use plain narrative. A dramatist can do none of this; he has to go on in dialogue. You and I know quite well that when my naval officer was explaining his invention to the girl, their conversation would have been long and very often repetitive. She would have asked questions; he would have gone over the ground again; gradually they would have fogged the thing out between them. The stage dialogue had to preserve the illusion of their natural conversation and yet to differ from it in almost every respect—in speed, in directness, in continuity and economy. And that brings me to the aspect of dialogue that I want chiefly to consider this evening—I mean, dialogue in its relationship to conversation.

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It is impossible to think of dialogue without thinking also of conversation, and I will say at once that I shall use the word "conversation" for the talk of men and women in ordinary life, and the word "dialogue" for the talk of characters in novels and plays. Though the connexion between the two is much more remote and complex than is generally

supposed, a connexion exists and we must examine it.

Conversation can be charming as an entertainment, but as a means of self-expression, still more as a means of intercommunication, it is extremely inadequate. Man is a creature who lives alone from birth to death. Even from those with whom he is most intimate he remains divided by impassable barriers; ego and ego do not combine. He lives as it were in a house on wheels which moves with him from place to place, from experience to experience, but which remains—according to his range—the palace or the prison of his individuality. Now and then in the supreme moments of his life—in his poetry, in his love, and, I think, in his death—the walls of his house dissolve or seem to dissolve; but of those supreme moments I need say only, in this context, that, whatever else they are, they are not conversational. And when the supreme moments of poetry and love are over, he finds himself again in his little house and begins to chatter again, just as Coleridge, after his voyage in a painted ship upon a painted ocean and his taste of the milk of paradise, sat down to years and years of table-talk, signifying a great deal (for Coleridge's little house was never less than a house of genius) and yet, by comparison with his moments of illumination, signifying nothing. And so Coleridge, like the rest of us, tried from within his house to communicate. He looked out of the window, using the faculty of sight; he stretched out his hand, using the faculty of touch; and he employed, as best he could, his marvellous gift of talk. And yet, how inadequate that gift was, even in

him! How much more inadequate in the rest of us! Language, even the whole language in the use of a great master, is no match for the infinite complexities of thought and feeling. Conversation, in which you and I improvise upon a vocabulary of a few hundred words, is only a clumsy use of a clumsy code. As a means of communication, it differs in degree but scarcely in kind from the barking of dogs or the yowling of cats, and they are assisted by a sense of smell which in us is sadly deteriorated. Indeed, I am inclined to think that cats have conversational advantages over us. They are not inhibited by our tendency to understatement. They do not confine themselves, on amorous occasions, to a casual cliché and an inarticulate gasp. They do not, like the most approved modern actors, throw away their lines. Many a time and oft, in such a night as this, I have heard them, in my London garden, run the whole gamut of comedy and tragedy from Venice to Verona, from Illyria to Glamis. I scarcely know whether I am listening to conversation or to dialogue, to improvisation or to art. One of the more glorious secrets of feline life is, I think, that cats rehearse their love-scenes—a practice which may be recommended to young men and women nowadays who, as if they were members of a weekly repertory company, so often undertake, without adequate preparation, the hazards of performance.

However that may be, cats are a lesson to all of us who are students of dialogue. It appears that there are not two cats in the whole world who cannot compose and play a Balcony Scene. Are there two of us who can? Their most eloquent and impassioned

dialogue appears to arise naturally from their conversation, as ours certainly does not; and such natural artists are they that, if for any reason the Balcony Scene doesn't go as it should one evening, they change their tempo, their convention, their style, until the lady looking down from the top of the wall is not Juliet but Lady Macbeth.

I hope I have now made it clear that it is not the purpose of dialogue to reproduce conversation naturalistically but rather, in the guise of conversation, to supply conversation's deficiencies—to be amusing where conversation is dull, to be economic where conversation is wasteful, to be articulate and lucid where conversation is mumbling or obscure. The method is, of course, the method of all art: intensification by selective discipline and order; and the application of this method by a great master has always, in whatever convention, tragic or frivolous, the same reward—the reward of all art—the discovery, through appearances, of a reality, an essence, underlying them.

At this, you will perhaps rebelliously exclaim: "It may be all very well to suggest that *Hamlet* leads us to the essence of things, to a reality within appearances, but surely you are not claiming that Congreve's dialogue in *The Way of the World* does anything of the kind? That is precisely what I do claim. Congreve distils for us the essence of a comic situation. By removing the dross from what would in fact have been the naturalistic talk of Mirabel and Millamant—the hesitations, the superfluities, the blur, the failure of the two speakers to respond to

each other and lead each other—Congreve reveals the pure metal of their special perplexity—and the metal sparkles and rings true. The essence of things is not necessarily dark; indeed, I would make bold to say that it never is to the eye of an artist or to the eye of faith. The essence of tragic things certainly is not; for tragedy that is genuinely tragic in vision and in form and not an ugly chaos of violence and self-pity, tragedy that is tragic because it is beautiful and beautiful because it is tragic, is always, always—even the tragedy of *Lear*—a voyage away from the Golden World and, therefore, recalls our minds to its point of departure. And if you are still inclined to believe that, in talking of the reality within appearances, I am talking of some vague philosophical abstraction so gloomy that you would prefer to leave it to the German commentators on *Hamlet*, let me carry you a step further. When Andrew Marvell wrote of

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade

he was saying for me what I wish to say. He was penetrating, or annihilating, natural things and arriving at their essence. Dialogue has the same purpose and, at its best, the same reward. And this is true whatever the subject and whatever the convention, tragic, comic or farcical. The essence of gay things is gaiety; of absurd things, absurdity; of light things, lightness of heart. Dialogue is a process of distillation. I shall, perhaps, best illustrate my point with a completely frivolous example: Algernon Moncreiff's second-act entrance in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Enter ALGERNON, very gay and debonair.

ALGERNON (*raising his bat*).—You are my little cousin Cecily, I'm sure.

CECILY.—You are under some strange mistake. I am not little. In fact, I believe I am more than usually tall for my age. (*Algernon is rather taken aback.*) But I am your cousin Cecily. You, I see from your card, are Uncle Jack's brother, my cousin Ernest, my wicked cousin Ernest.

ALGERNON.—Oh, I am not really wicked at all, cousin Cecily. You mustn't think that I am wicked.

CECILY.—If you are not, then you have certainly been deceiving us all in a very inexcusable manner. I hope you have not been leading a double life, pretending to be wicked and being really good all the time. That would be hypocrisy.

ALGERNON (*looks at her in amazement*).—Oh! Of course I have been rather reckless.

CECILY.—I am glad to hear it.

ALGERNON.—In fact, now you mention the subject, I have been very bad in my own small way.

CECILY.—I don't think you should be so proud of that, though I am sure it must have been very pleasant.

ALGERNON.—It is much pleasanter being here with you.

CECILY.—I can't understand how you are here at all. Uncle Jack won't be back till Monday afternoon.

ALGERNON.—That is a great disappointment. I am obliged to go up by the first train on Monday morning. I have a business appointment that I am anxious . . . to miss!

CECILY.—Couldn't you miss it anywhere but in London?

ALGERNON.—No; the appointment is in London.

CECILY.—Well, I know, of course, how important it is not to keep a business engagement, if one wants to retain any sense of the beauty of life, but still I think you had better wait till Uncle Jack arrives. I know he wants to speak to you about your emigrating.

ALGERNON.—About my what?

CECILY.—Your emigrating. He has gone up to buy your outfit.

ALGERNON.—I certainly wouldn't let Jack buy my outfit. He has no taste in neckties at all.

CECILY.—I don't think you will require neckties. Uncle Jack is sending you to Australia.

ALGERNON.—Australia! I'd sooner die.

CECILY.—Well, he said at dinner on Wednesday night, that you would have to choose between this world, the next world, and Australia.

ALGERNON.—Oh, well! The accounts I have received of Australia and the next world, are not particularly encouraging. This world is good enough for me, cousin Cecily.

CECILY.—Yes, but are you good enough for it?

ALGERNON.—I'm afraid I'm not that. That is why I want you to reform me. You might make that your mission, if you don't mind, cousin Cecily.

CECILY.—I'm afraid I've no time, this afternoon.

ALGERNON.—Well, would you mind my reforming myself this afternoon?

CECILY.—It is rather Quixotic of you. But I think you should try.

ALGERNON.—I will. I feel better already.

CECILY.—You are looking a little worse.

ALGERNON.—That is because I am hungry.

CECILY.—How thoughtless of me. I should have remembered that when one is going to lead an entirely new life, one requires regular and wholesome meals. Won't you come in?

ALGERNON.—Thank you. Might I have a buttonhole first? I never have any appetite unless I have a buttonhole first.

CECILY.—A Maréchal Niel? (*Picks up scissors.*)

ALGERNON.—No, I'd sooner have a pink rose.

CECILY.—Why? (*Cuts a flower.*)

ALGERNON.—Because you are like a pink rose, cousin Cecily.

That dialogue has little resemblance to any earthly conversation between a man and a girl. It is not flirtation as flirtation *appears* to anyone and yet it is the essence of flirtation.

My old friend Mr. Allan Aynsworth, who played the part on the first night and is still very gay and

debonair, tells me that, at rehearsals, there were many misgivings about the play. There was a certain hankering after the melodramatic plot, the emotional stress and solemnity which, from the Victorian point of view, had given dramatic substance to Wilde's earlier plays. It was felt, I gather, that *The Importance of Being Earnest* wouldn't give the audience enough to get their teeth into, and that pure froth, pure absurdity, completely without emotion or the slap-stick of Victorian farce, might send them away dissatisfied. It was decided, quite rightly, never to force a laugh, to speak every line as if the actor were completely unaware of its being funny; in brief to rely upon Wilde; but it was decided also to cover his tracks and at all costs to play quickly and never to be caught in the trap of waiting for a laugh that didn't come. At a late rehearsal, which hadn't gone too well, Wilde congratulated the cast on its good fortune in appearing in a play which would last as long as English comedy endured, and no one took him, or believed that he took himself, seriously. Then a very odd thing happened. On the first night, long before Lady Bracknell's entrance, as soon as Aynsworth and Alexander began to play the cucumber-sandwich scene, the audience began to laugh, and the embarrassing thing was that they laughed at every line and at almost every phrase of the longer speeches. The actors were both delighted and dismayed. They had rehearsed the play in one *tempo*; they had, quite suddenly, to perform it in another; and when the audience, not content to laugh, interrupted the dialogue with rounds of applause, they began to understand that they were

engaged in a play which, if laughter ever allowed them to reach the end of it, would be unique and immortal in the theatre.

If we can understand why this was so, we shall have come very near to the innermost secret of comic dialogue. *The Importance of Being Earnest* owed much of its success to its superlative good humour, but neither its good humour nor the delightful impudence of its plot made it a masterpiece. It lives by three things: first that its dialogue, though it looks like prose, has a formal selectiveness and rhythm; secondly, that it never for an instant swerves from its own convention—never in a phrase or a word falters into solemnity or sentimentality or cruelty or bitterness; and, finally, that, as a result, it is not merely a pleasant, ingenuous lighthearted play, but carries one, beyond lighthearted behaviour and appearances, into the very essence of lightness of heart.

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Now, before going any further in the theatre, let us look for a moment at dialogue in the novel. The first thing to notice—because it is a matter of evident fact and not of opinion—is that whereas a play consists wholly of dialogue and visible action, a novel consists of narrative and description, with dialogue used as an auxiliary. The degree in which dialogue is regarded as auxiliary or subordinate differs from novel to novel, and I should not dream of laying down a rule about it; but I think it may be said that a novelist who puts everything or almost everything into direct speech is denying himself many of the

richest opportunities of his own craft and is receiving in compensation none of the support given to a dramatist by the stage. In saying this I do not forget that a great masterpiece of our time, *The Dynasts* of Thomas Hardy, was written entirely in dialogue with the intention that it should be read, not acted; but *The Dynasts* is, in effect, not a play and still less a novel; it is an epic poem; and it does not in itself give valid support to those whose novels are an almost uninterrupted patter of talk.

But the real question is not of quantity but of quality and purpose. It seems to me quite certain that the one thing no dialogue must be is microphonic. It must not be, or aim at being, the product of a recording instrument concealed in a bar or at a street-corner or in a drawing-room. There are novels, particularly second-hand, derivative novels written under American influence, which sound very much like that, but do not let us deceive ourselves: the Americans who really write—Faulkner, for example—though they do “patter” a great deal, are never “microphonic”. They are not only highly selective but extremely stylised. What gives them their microphonic effect is the fact that they are so often writing about crude and uncultivated men and women who, in life, are loquacious and yet inarticulate. The appetites of these creatures are strong, their opinions stronger, their indignations strongest of all, but in conversation their vocabulary is even smaller than yours and mine and their syntax almost non-existent. Therefore, in conversation, they endlessly stutter and repeat themselves and, in exasperation, shout; or, if they happen not to be hobos, but tycoons,

their conversation is a vast sausage-string of poly-syllabic clichés, of circumlocutary avoidances. In both cases, the ruling passion is the same—to go on talking and talking in the desperate hope that somehow what they feel so violently will express itself, for unlike the simple folk of Hardy or George Eliot, living in an ancient civilization, the hobos and the tycoons are unaware of their own limitations and have not the once-universal code of Bible imagery to fall back on. It follows that American novelists, when writing on the hobo, the gangster or the tycoon level, have to preserve an appearance of loquaciousness—sometimes as quickfiring as a machine-gun and sometimes a kind of sub-human dribbling—and, at the same time, to express the reality within this appearance: the passionate, the pathetic or the agonized inarticulateness. The conversation itself, if reported microphonically, would be without significance and deadly dull; but the *dialogue* in the hands of an American master, selective and rhythmical, whether we enjoy it or not, is, in its own way, as stylized as the dialogue of Meredith and succeeds for that reason.

I shall not attempt to read an illustrative passage from Faulkner or Hemingway. Everything in their dialogue depends on an intonation and rhythm of which I am incapable. In any case all of you, who are so much younger than I am, are acquainted with these writers; the sound of their tom-toms and their war-cries are sweet and familiar music in your ears, and I shall be content if you will concede that their dialogue at its best is not microphonic but, in its own strange way, poetic and evocative. It would be

easy to prove by a reading from the Penny-whistle scene in *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* that Meredith's dialogue seeks always to discover reality within appearances; it would be easy to make the same point by studying the long cadences of Emily Brontë or the strange resonance—the echo of ghostly footsteps in corridors of bronze—which gives character to the dialogue, as well as to the narrative, of Edgar Allan Poe. We all know that Poe and Meredith and Emily Brontë were poets, and I prefer to prove my case from the less obvious examples—from Faulkner and, shall we say, from Defoe.

With Defoe we are at the other end of the storytelling tradition. Defoe saw himself as a naturalist or reporter. His *Journal of the Plague Year* was a kind of naturalist hoax, a piece of fiction designed to give an effect of eye-witness journalism. And Defoe's novel *Moll Flanders* is, above all else, plain-speaking, not high-falutin', not fantasicated, not, in any sense, deliberately stylized. Defoe gave his own definition of a perfect style as "that in which a man speaking to five hundred people, of all common and various capacities, idiots or lunatics excepted, should be understood by them all and in the same sense which the speaker intended to be understood." What is the effect of this on Defoe's use of dialogue? It is almost to abolish it. Dialogue if employed at all has to be infused with the author's style; that is why Meredith's characters, while each preserves his or her individuality, all talk Meredith, and Kipling's characters, whether they are private soldiers or acid Anglo-Indian ladies or animals in the jungle, all talk Kipling. This confronted Defoe with a special

difficulty. The essence of his style was plainness; his whole strength was in the matter-of-fact. Dialogue, if he had used it lavishly, would have had to be matter-of-fact too, and that would have been microphonic, tedious and intolerable. Therefore Defoe used direct speech very rarely. He recounted a great many conversations, but he *recounted* them, using continually the device of indirect speech.

Consider this little scene of love-making:

“I struggled to get away, and yet did it but faintly neither, and he held me fast, and still kissed me, till he was almost out of breath, and then, sitting down, says, ‘Dear Betty, I am in love with you.’

“His words I must confess, fired my blood; all my spirits flew about my heart and put me into disorder enough, which he might easily have seen in my face. He repeated it afterwards several times, that he was in love with me, and my heart spoke as plain as a voice, that I liked it; nay, whenever he said, ‘I am in love with you’, my blushes plainly replied, ‘Would you were, sir.’”

Or watch Defoe’s treatment when the would-be lover returns to the attack:

“It was his younger sister’s chamber that I was in, and as there was nobody in the house but the maids below-stairs, he was, it may be, the ruder; in short, he began to be earnest with me indeed. Perhaps he found me a little too easy, for God knows I made no resistance to him while he only held me in his arms and kissed me; indeed, I was too well pleased with it to resist him much.

“However, as it were, tired with that kind of work, we sat down, and there he talked with me a

great while; he said he was charmed with me, and that he could not rest night or day till he had told me how he was in love with me, and, if I was able to love him again, and would make him happy, I should be the saving of his life, and many such fine things. I said little to him again, but easily discovered that I was a fool, and that I did not in the least perceive what he meant."

In the second passage, though "he talked with me a great while", there is not a word of direct speech. In the first there are but eight: "Dear Betty, I am in love with you" and these are deliberately echoed. Thus, by abstaining from dialogue in the special circumstances of his own case, Defoe confirms two principles of dialogue: that, when used, it must harmonize with the writer's style, and, secondly, that its purpose is not to report a conversation but to communicate its essence. Defoe with unerring instinct fastened on the only eight words that really mattered. They were the theme of that conversation; he stated it firmly; he repeated it once; and swept all else away in the swift advance of his own narrative.

I have spoken of Defoe because I wished to illustrate my theme by contrast—the contrast 'between poetic novelists and a story-teller who is so plainly down-to-earth. It would be pleasant to explore another contrast—that presented by Miss Austen; but that would carry us too far this evening. What is more, in this country, Miss Austen is a kind of religion. It is considered almost blasphemous to do more than call attention to her infallibility, and I have no wish to disturb her congregation at their devotions. It would be the height of indiscretion to

criticize the dialogue of a goddess, though I think her worshippers will agree, will indeed claim, that her dialogue also discovers a reality within the appearance of polite manners. It is just a question of whether that reality interests and amuses you, and, if so, in what degree.

I would add only a word more. The theory of dialogue which I have put forward this evening—that dialogue is not a report but a distillation, a formal means of penetrating to the essence of things—is the theory upon which poetic dialogue rests—and I am speaking now not of dialogue that is poetic only in the wider sense but of dialogue in verse.

It would be foolish to suggest that “distilled” dialogue, evocative of a reality within appearance, cannot be written in prose, but whoever has attempted it must be aware of two things: first, that the attempt drives him away from naturalism, into non-conversational prose-rhythms heavily charged with poetic overtones; and, secondly, that to strike out clearly into verse would be a relief, a liberation and an enablement. There is, I think, in the dire appearances of contemporary life and in our sense of the spiritual reality underlying those appearances, a new compulsion to write on two planes—the plane of observation and the plane of apprehension—and this compulsion is so strong that it is driving modern dramatic dialogue towards poetry. This you will say is obvious enough, and you will recall with respect and admiration the plays of Mr. Eliot; but if I add that modern dramatic dialogue is being driven towards verse, the question becomes more open,

and Mr. Eliot is by no means a final answer to it. I do not wish to enter into a technical argument about Mr. Eliot's prosody. According to certain definitions, he is writing verse, and we will not now dispute those definitions. It is true nevertheless that when he holds his audiences by his intelligence, his feeling, his insight, his story-telling, sometimes even by his rhythm, all these qualities, as he so brilliantly displays them, are far more nearly akin to the qualities of a prose-dramatist with a poet's mind than to those of a poetic dramatist in the ordinary meaning of that phrase.

This of course is, in him, deliberate. Just as in his non-dramatic verse he set out to avoid conventionally poetic language, so, in his plays, he has avoided the classical metres. For all this he had good reasons. It has enabled him to break down barriers in the theatre that might not otherwise have been broken down and to produce work of high distinction. Nevertheless I believe that a greater challenge lies ahead. Dramatic dialogue will not regain its supreme power of distilling human experience and of revealing to ordinary men and women their essence, their being, the innermost truth of their physical and spiritual life, until it enchants them and sings to them and possesses their memories.

The great obstacle is Shakespeare who has so used and varied the iambic pentameter that any approach to it in the theatre seems now an impudent challenge to his gigantic ghost. And yet a line of ten syllables with five major stresses is the norm of English dramatic dialogue, and I believe we must either use a variant of it or discover an alternative to it that

enchants and sings. The other classical English metre—the octosyllables of Andrew Marvell and Rupert Brooke—is too short a line for the theatre, and the line of twelve syllables, though a natural necessity in France, seems not to respond easily to the English genius. Michael Drayton, unquestionably a great poet and the writer of a sonnet that takes rank with any of Shakespeare's, chose the twelve-syllable line for what was to have been his masterpiece, *Poly-Olbion*, and the English ear has rejected it. It is very rarely that twelve syllables sing to us, and yet sometimes they do. Once they sang of the essence of things as no poet has ever sung:

Then dawns the Invisible, the unseen its truth reveals;
My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels—
Its wings are almost free, its home, its harbour found;
Measuring the gulf it stoops and dares the final bound,

But these wonderful verses are rhymed and I greatly doubt whether it is possible, in an English theatre, to use twelve syllables blank. We may vary the pentameter as we will and as we can, just as we may vary the food we eat; but it has always been the bread and the wine of our poetic life and we may find in the end that dramatic dialogue cannot do without it. In any case I am certain of one thing: that only a metre with a basic regularity of stress is able to raise dramatic dialogue to its highest power. Nothing else can create in an audience that rhythm of expectation and fulfilment, that music of the accepting imagination which quiets the petty uproar of our superficial minds and makes us still and receiving. If, in a play, the President of a People's Republic, about to be assassinated, were to say in prose: "Now, boys, sit

right down here and I will tell you why Presidents of People's Republics are always shot up", no one would be greatly interested; and even if he were to say in free verse:

Now, boys, sit right down here and I
Will tell you why
Presidents of People's Republics are
Always shot up

no one would do more than reverently cough. But if the actor were to say:

For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings,

then, from stalls to gallery, the whole theatre would be hushed and through the stillness of tragedy would sound the music of the Golden World.

Or, if a dramatist wished, at the cold opening of his play, to communicate that a man and woman, whom the audience had not seen before, were passionately in love, how should he do it? It cannot be done in prose. It cannot be done in free verse. But listen:

CLEOPATRA.—If it be love indeed, tell me how much.

ANTONY.—There's beggary in the love that can be reckon'd.

CLEOPATRA.—I'll set a bourn how far to be belov'd.

ANTONY.—Then must thou needs find out new heaven,
new earth.

In four pentameters, all is said. If dialogue is to fly straight to the essence of things, the arrow must sing in the air.

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